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IN THE NATION

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The Security Mania

Is it really so hard to protect Ronald Reagan — or any future President — that the Secret Service must close the two blocks of Pennsylvania Avenue that run in front of the White House? And if the threat is that great, will even such an extreme measure prevent some fanatic terrorist from doing his evil work at some other location or in some as-yet undreamed-of fashion?

Fortunately, James A. Baker 3d, who as Secretary of the Treasury oversees the Secret Service, has told Congress that the proposal to seal off the historic avenue is "still very much in the planning stage." So there should be time to stop this latest high-handed scheme of Washington's myriad security zealots.

They don't always get their way. The Reagan Administration, for instance, has just smothered a proposal by its chief cloak-and-dagger man, William J. Casey, the C.I.A. Director. Mr. Casey wanted to include in a C.I.A. authorization bill a provision making it a crime for Government employees to disclose, to anyone not authorized to receive it, classified information that "reasonably could be expected to damage the national security."

Reasonably? Secrecy buffs like Mr. Casey might consider it "reasonable" to expect that disclosure of an impropriety by, say, the C.I.A. Director would damage national security. And all kinds of information, some important and much not, gets classified by the thousands of Government officials, high and low, who are authorized to wield a secrecy stamp.

Thus Mr. Casey's brainchild, if enacted, could have been used to muzzle whistle-blowers, cover up official wrongdoing, hide embarrassing Administration blunders and generally clamp a lid on information the public needs about government policy and its effectiveness — or lack of it. It's not so certain that it would have protected vital secrets, whatever they are, any better than such matters are now shielded.

A secrets act, though aimed at government officials, also would hamper journalists by intimidating their sources and would lead inevitably to the criminal prosecution of reporters. If an official defied the act and gave classified information to someone in the press who then printed or broadcast the information, the reporter could be subpoenaed and ordered to disclose his source. If he refused, he could be held in contempt of court and sent to jail.

The major weakness in any official secrets act is in defining what's to be kept secret, on pain of criminal prosecution.

"Classified information" is no answer, since virtually anything, for any reason, can be and is classified by government officials in any Administration. And even some military secrets — for example, a plan to invade Nicaragua, if one existed — would be better exposed to the public before the United States found itself involved in a war that was a *fait accompli*.

That, however, is not why an inter-agency group rejected the Casey plan. "If you're going to do something like this," an official told Stuart Taylor Jr. of The New York Times, "you don't do it as an obscure provision in a C.I.A. authorization bill." That suggests that the Administration might yet put forward a secrets act, since Mr. Reagan and other high officials are known to be eager to stop leaks to the press. But a major political effort probably would be required to overcome Congressional resistance.

Recognizing that, surely the Administration will move slowly and think long and hard before trying to close Pennsylvania Avenue. Tearing two blocks out of its heart would not only disrupt a major Washington traffic artery; it would prevent the hundreds of thousands of Americans who bring their children to the nation's capital from enjoying one of its great symbolic sights — the view of the north portico of the White House from the avenue passing between it and Lafayette Park.

Why not sandbag the President's house itself? Or build a 20-foot concrete wall around it? Little more damage would be done to the openness of this society, or to confidence in its institutions. Americans, after all, have been strolling or riding along Pennsylvania Avenue for nearly two centuries, sometimes even catching a glimpse of the White House's temporary occupants; they've watched inaugural parades from the sidewalks, and funeral parades too, and seen the leaders of the world come and go. And the security zealots can protect nothing more important than what they would risk: the democratic sense that this Government belongs to its citizens. □